

## push me back by flagpoles

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** F/M, I CANT HELP IT I LOVE MY KIDS, eleven/mike if you squint, have i mentioned i love mike/nancy brotp bc i do

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Mike Wheeler

**Relationships:** Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler & Mike Wheeler

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2016-08-21

**Updated:** 2016-08-21

**Packaged:** 2022-03-31 22:33:22

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 4,666

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

He looks at her, hair in a braid and wearing his jacket because she left hers back in the car and it's so windy that its whistling. He is in way, way over his head; impractically so. For her he would probably rob a corner store or live in the Upside Down or kill a dragon.

(or, the one where they're cross country monster hunters. kind of)

## push me back

The day Nancy loses her best sweater in a Laundromat is also the day that they find another entrance to the Upside Down.

Actually, that sentence is kind of misleading, because they know exactly where the sweater is. It's in the Upside Down. So the verb shouldn't actually be 'loses' but rather 'becomes irretrievable'.

"Who says things like 'irretrievable'" Nancy asks him, sitting the back of the truck and holding a tea towel to her bleeding arm. They're driving through a back ally in New York at three in the morning, the distant wailing of police sirens still loud enough that he had to turn the radio on. She's sitting in the back wearing his old sweater, bruised lip jutting out just slightly and Jonathan's hands are shaking on the steering wheel.

"People who spent every summer reading *Hitchhiker Guide to the Galaxy*." He answers; attempting to make it sound like his throat isn't closed up. He can see the landscape of it still, stretched over drywall, an endless black hole that had opened while they weren't looking.

She laughs, and the song changes to something about a girl who ends up on the wrong side of town. Jonathan shudders, jauntily twisting the knob to change the station.

///

They're Monster Hunters. This is how Nancy has taken to thinking

about it. However, she can't exactly tell her mother she's going around the country looking for missing children and trying to understand how parallel universes work, so she has said she's merely taking a gap year. Do some travelling maybe, meet some new people, gain some experience in the real world.

The irony of it almost makes her laugh, and she tells Jonathan who smiles but in that way he does when he's thinking about something else. Probably the Laundromat, how the entrance had appeared in the wall in the space of a second. He's thinking of how quickly it had grabbed her, pulled her back so quickly her sweater had torn in the middle.

She had screamed, and he'd caught her and then he'd shot it and people were yelling and he was pale but she had only been scared for a single second because she had a lighter in her jean pocket and she could reach it, and it was too late for too many people to be around, and Jonathan still had a hold of her hand.

"We can go back." He tells her two nights later, lying in the back of the truck when it's her turn to keep watch.

"No." she says, simply, "we can't."

//

When they're driving to Maine where some mother has reported her kid missing, last seen at school, small amounts of blood found at the scene, Nancy makes him pull over at a gas station.

“I hate red liquorice” he complains as she dumps approximately seven packets of it in the backseat.

“Don’t be ridiculous, they’re *Twizzlers*” she opens the passenger door, “they’re completely different.”

Turns out she’s right, because *Twizzlers* are (unbelievably) worse and rank as about the third worst thing he’s ever eaten, before spinach brownies but after the soup sandwiches Will made when he was seven. He has to roll down the window to spit it out, and then drain a bottle of Coke all while Nancy laughs.

“I can’t believe you don’t like *Twizzlers*, everyone likes *Twizzlers*! How can you never have even *tried* them before! Oh my God, we’ve still got six and a half packets left, I’m going to have to eat them all by myself, it’s going to take *years*. “

Jonathan laughs, still half coughing, thinking about how *Twizzlers* cost 50 cents more than other candy back in Hawkins and that now he has six and a half packets sitting in the back of this truck he’s driving upstate with *Nancy Wheeler*, who is currently laughing at him in the passenger seat and holding the map wrong. He shakes himself for a second, just to make sure he isn’t in some extended hallucination, before pulling over and threatening to dump the remaining packets on the side of the road.

///

“She was with the Grandparents, they picked her up from school and forgot to tell the mum.” She says as she walks out of the police precinct, hair in a high ponytail and wearing Mike’s shirt she took with her by accident.

Jonathan is leaning against the wall, watching her walk over and already pulling the keys out of his pocket. Something had felt off about this one, the girl had only been gone for eight hours, there wasn’t signs of a struggle, but they were in the area anyway and it not like there is a textbook case to refer to when a kid gets taken by something from another universe.

Nancy takes the keys from him. “I’m driving. You do too much.”

He looks at her, tilting his head slightly so his hair falls in his eyes. “I don’t mind.”

She knows he doesn’t, Jonathan would probably say he ‘wouldn’t mind’ even if someone sellotaped a piano to his chest and removed his knees.

///

They get a lot of weird looks when they open the trunk.

Its where they keep all their shit, bear traps, guns, bullets, hammers, hunting knives, and- his personal favourite- an enormous slab of concrete that they don’t have a use for yet, but they’re working on it.

"What is all this?" says some kind of old lady, horrified while walking past them in the carpark as they're stacking Cheerio's behind the machete.

"For the werewolves" Nancy will say, or maybe "New kind of Predator kit". Occasionally it's: "all for my new hit-woman start-up, care to donate?" and once "Well *I* don't know lady we found it in *your* shed."

///

"Mum wants to know if you're eating a balanced diet." Mike asks down the phone, and Nancy rolls her eyes.

"Tell her yes." She says, reaching into the chip bag.

"Liar." He retorts. She rolls her eyes again. "Find anything?"

"At least three have definitely been taken. I told Hopper and he's... doing whatever he does when he goes in to get them back." She'd tried to do it once, but then the entrance had closed and Jonathan had panicked and called Hopper, who called Joyce, who called Mike, who called everyone else, and then when she'd finally gotten out twenty minutes later- empty handed- Dustin had even called Steve and everyone yelled had jointly yelled at her for thirty minutes. Jonathan had been so white when she appeared again, like someone had drained all his blood while she was gone.

“Right.” He sounds wistful, and she can just picture him. Mike, fifteen, leaning against the fridge and holding the phone, wishing he was out there looking instead of her. *I wonder how tall he is now*, she thinks. He’d been taller than her when she’d left. She inexplicably, terribly, misses him. He would be so much better at this than she is.

“Have you- have you seen anything?” he asks, and she closes her eyes, lets her head drop back into the seat.

“I will call you the second we find her, Mike.” She says, because that’s what the question is, really. The whole thing is sickening awful, because the monster had come back and Eleven had not and Nancy tries very hard not to throw up whenever she thinks about it. That little girl, in there all alone. And Mike, at home, wearing those ghastly pants he likes and missing her like hell.

He says nothing for a minute. “I know.” He offers quietly.

She listens down the end of the line, and in the background there is the sound of Holly vaguely yelling about something. She can hear Lucas to, some kind of argument about the remote. Her chest hurts.

“Mike I’d always call you first.”

“Yeah.” he answers after a beat, “Yeah, you better.”

///

Jonathan thinks that they probably have maybe eight months left in their budget.

Although, he's hardly certain if you could call it a budget if he has no idea where the money is coming from. He has a suspicion that Hopper is either embezzling or straight up stealing money from the police department or some other kind of government agency, but he doesn't ask for fear of actually being correct. Naturally when he tells Nancy about having about eight months left of money, she does that thing with her lips where she purses them together and raises her eyebrows at the same time. He forgets what he was saying entirely.

"Okay." She looks at him, hard, and now he can't remember what his name is. "We can get a lot done in eight months."

They sit there for a minute, the greasy diner table between them, thinking about that. How, in eight months, they'll be back in Hawkins doing whatever it was he did back then. He honestly can't remember, what did he do before Will was taken? What did he do before he got Will back? What could he possibly have done with all those days?

She reaches over to his tray and takes a fry. The dinner they're in is absolutely shit, and just as he thinks this the lights above them flicker for a second. His heart leaps into his throat, a pound of blood. When he looks down, he can see that she's grabbed his hand.

///

They go into woods when they can find time and shoot stuff, trying to see who has better aim. Jonathan lines up smaller and smaller and smaller objects until eventually he's balancing one of her old hair-ties on a log, yelling at her to stop laughing and take the shot.

She does, and misses, and then he's calling her a disgrace while she threatens to shoot him. Later, after Joyce calls to tell them to come home and also go to Washington to check on a grandmother who keeps seeing things in her walls in the same breath, Jonathan goes to lie on the hood of the car.

"What do think the odds are that this car is stolen?" she says, climbing up next to him and leaning against the windscreen.

"Oh, one hundred percent. He gave it to us with brand new license plates and my mum kept going on about the irony of a police chief being the biggest crook in town. Also, Will told me before we left that he saw him hotwire it."

She laughs. "God, he's so dodgy."

They sit for a minute, looking out at the landscape of wherever they are. She can't remember, they've been driving so long. She hasn't eaten anything but Cheetos and cucumber for three days, and hasn't dreamed about the Upside-Down for at least seven. That has to be a new record.

"he's great though." Jonathan whispers, more to himself than

anything. Nancy looks over to him, hair shorter since she gave him that haircut two states back. She can feel the windscreen wiper pressing into the small of her back, the cool glass against her neck. There is something in her chest.

“Yeah, he is.” She says, “They all are.”

///

It's Will's birthday in eight days, and Jonathan buys him two new comics that he mails in the post office while Nancy stands outside and devises a plan to break into the nearest mental hospital.

“That's where our guy is.” She says in protest when he informs her of what a terrible idea it is.

“Maybe he really is sick.” Jonathan argues, knowing full well that it is a complete lie.

“That is a complete lie” Nancy cries, hands in the air, “He was fired from the Department and then *two days later* had a ‘mental breakdown’- she makes air quotes with her fingers “- and had to be admitted to a place where visitors aren't allowed and patients can't have communication with the outside world. That is not a coincidence.”

Johnathan rubs his face. “Can we just- can we just sleep on it, maybe, for a while- two weeks. We'll call Hopper and see what Mike thinks and just... please.” he trails off. *I desperately do not want you to do anything unsafe* he thinks, looking at her, *you have no idea how badly.*

///

Nancy has dreams that aren't nightmares anymore. In one she is sitting on her couch and watching Mike, Lucas, Will and Dustin all try to explain to her every rule of Dungeons and Dragons at once while she eats tomato soup out of a cup. In another her and Holly play noughts and crosses until they run out of pencil lead.

Lots have Barb in them, always a figure in the rear view mirror of a car, leaving the room just as Nancy walks in, standing in the back of an enormous crowd. Nancy can never get to her, always yelling her name and arriving two seconds late. She cannot bring herself to call them nightmares because she doesn't wake up, sweating, at the thought of them. She doesn't wake up at all, just rolls over the next morning and can't say anything for a minute. For an hour.

In one, she's at a baseball game with Steve. He's playing and she watching him from the stands- cheering- and wearing his jersey which is strange because she'd given all his clothes back to him when she'd left, when they'd broken up. But there is Steve, holding the bat and looking over his shoulder to grin at her, hair flying. The whole stadium is full, crowd roaring.

But it feels off, the jacket is too big, the arms so long she can't see her hands. The crowd is loud, she's getting hotter but can't seem to take the jacket off, every time she does there is another one underneath it. She almost wants to cry; her eardrums feel like splitting from all of the yelling.

Then, two seconds later, she isn't in the baseball stadium at all. She is in a huge open field, and Jonathan is there, camera next to him and holding two daises. *I don't understand how you do that*, he says,

gesturing to the daisy chain around her ankle. There is sunlight everywhere, and she is warm right through to her ribs.

*It's like this* she says, taking the daisies and knotting them together, then picking another one and doing the same. She hears the shutter go off, and looks to see him holding his camera and grinning at her. She starts laughing, sun in her eyes and the sky an endless parade of blue. She could do anything. She could be anything she wanted.

///

They break into the mental hospital. It does not go as badly as expected, but then again Jonathan was expecting them to both die.

They peel away, Nancy driving this time because he's almost sure he'd broken his hand when he was trying to keeping the elevator doors from shutting. She looks over to him, biting her lip and then: "I'm calling your mum."

Johnathan almost has a heart attack. "What? No, no, we *cannot* do that." He is thinking of his mother dropping the phone, grabbing her keys and driving herself to him without telling anyone. She has threatened to do it before.

"Well I don't know what to do, we can't go to the hospital because-"she stops, looking at him again "they'll have questions and want *money* and I don't know how to fix a broken hand or if it even is broken or..."

Her eyes keep darting between the road and him, and she's biting her lip so hard he's worried she's going to draw blood. His hand is throbbing, palm swelling to uncomfortable proportions.

"Then-"he looks around the window, as if hoping to see Hopper or his mum walk past and tell him what to do. Instead, he sees a phone booth. "Then let's call the boys." He says.

Nancy pulls over, gets out of the car and dials.

"Hello? Oh, Dustin, its Nancy, is Mike there? Well tell him to stop playing for a minute, this is important. No- Dustin just- Jonathan's broken his hand and I need- Oh, hi Will, no he's fine he's just... ah, broken his hand. We need to know how to wrap it up. No I don't think- oh, Lucas, hi- can you get Mike please... He got it caught in an elevator door, it's very purple and, just, go put Mike on, no I do not want to talk to Dustin again.... Mike! Stop letting your friends answer the phone! Jonathan's broken his hand and I need to know how to wrap it, or set it or something, and tell Dustin to stop singing or humming or whatever he's doing that's making that noise."

She makes him go and buy a can of cold soda to put on the swelling while she writes down Mike's instructions on the back of her hand. They find a bandage in the back of a mouldy first aid kit and she wraps his hand gently, weaving it between his fingers. "Is it too tight? Is it too tight?" she asks every four seconds, voice pinched and shaking slightly.

"It's fine." He says each time, "I'm fine."

///

He keeps taking photos of her when she's doing things. They're not even interesting, it's just her filling up the car with gas, eating cold soup from the can, talking to someone on a street corner about the fact that at the same time very night all the lights in their house go on at once.

She'll be standing in a supermarket isle asking him if he wants to get Cheerio's or Cornflakes when the shutter will go off. They're in the car talking about how they miss hot food when he's taking a photo of her with the light streaming in the driver's seat window, driving with one hand and eating a Twinkie with the other.

In the dark he'll turn the flash on, taking shots of her sitting on her sleeping bag, holding the notebook where they write all their information, drinking water, writing her name on the roof of the car with gravel, pointing at him while talking about the first Physics test she ever failed. In the day he'll take photos of her holding the map wrong, pointing at a squirrel, laughing, eating pizza, looking for the picnic mat, making a list of locations they still have to hit, calling Hopper from a payphone.

"You're wasting your memory space." She accuses, after he's taken at least seven pictures of her in the record store, picking through bargain bins.

"No I'm not." He says simply, and takes another one. Her face flushes, and she looks down before glancing back at him, camera still up, lens still on her.

///

"Nancy, *please*, this is important."

"You cannot buy me a birthday cake. They're *eleven dollars*, Jonathan, that's more than we spend on food in four days."

"I don't care. I'm buying it. It comes with candles which we can re-use, so technically it's an investment."

"Well... I'm not saying I'm okay with it but... if I was.... I would say we should get the vanilla sponge."

///

It's quite difficult to interrogate the relatives of missing people without looking like a prick, but she makes an effort. There is usually a lot of silence and her judging whether or not it is polite to ask if they have had electricity problems since.

It's awful, people sitting there in their homes usually crying or trying not to. The capacity of human beings to miss each other is almost staggering. She thinks about what she would have done if they'd taken Mike, or Holly, or her mum. Barb's parents still hang posters up for her in the centre of town on weekends

"What did you do when Will was gone?" she whispers when she's

lying across the seats in the back trying to sleep. She can see him tense up from where is in the driver's seat, and she almost regrets it but, she has to know. Even the thought of it, Jonathan, Joyce, sitting in their silent house with those lights everywhere, hoping for a miracle. She imagines how hollow everything would have felt, every room too big without the extra person to fill it.

"Went crazy." he answered, "lost my mind."

If she wanted, she could grab his hand from this angle. It was just there, dangling between the seat and the gear shift. She can see his palm, a still healing cut on it from when he tried to open that can with a knife. She reaches over, touching his fingers and he physically jerks in his seat like she has just shocked him. As if she is made of electricity. She slides her fingers through his, rubbing her thumb along the back of his palm. *Do not crush his hand* she thinks, as if he is something delicate, a thing to be preserved.

///

He likes it when there aren't other people around. What he used to mean by 'other people' was anyone who wasn't Will or his mum, but now that also sort of means Nancy.

Except it's not really a 'sort of', it's an absolute, because he likes driving with her, windows down and hair everywhere, likes eating cold soup with her and complaining about it, likes talking about parallel dimensions with her and hearing about her favourite colours.

He tells her he wants to go to NYU, out loud. He can count the

number of times he's told that to someone, and the number is one because it was just his mum. He had said it all at once, as if by saying it quickly it would mean less, and she had beamed at him, telling him how it was amazing, asking what he would study, what made him want to go in the first place.

He looks at her, hair in a braid and wearing his jacket because she left hers back in the car and it's so windy that its whistling. He is in way, way over his head, impractically so. For her he would probably rob a corner store or live in the Upside Down or kill a dragon.

///

For a week they do nothing, go nowhere, see no one. Jonathan calls it a vacation and Nancy calls it running out gas money and waiting for Hopper to get them some more. They build a fire at night, using twigs and a boy-scout book that Jonathan took from Will. The boys are going to turn sixteen next year, she thinks, and then stops thinking because it stresses her out.

She wears a yellow dress that is one of the only clean clothes she has left, because they haven't had money for a laundromat in a while. They go swimming in a river and she dunks him under the water so he gets her back by telling her he saw an eel. They dry in the sun, spread out on the grass, bodies glistening until Jonathan blisters from sunburn all across his chest and they have to go in.

They try and eat something warm, attempting to heat up pasta over the fire embers and only succeeding in making lukewarm pasta and melting plastic. She talks to her mother on a nearby payphone for about three minutes before running out of money, promises to eat better, and then eats an entire box of Cheerio's while trying to beat

Jonathan in noughts and crosses.

The days are cool and the nights are just cold enough to need to wear socks. Once, she comes back from the river, towelling her hair and wearing a dirty skirt with a sweater she found in the glovebox. "I look terrible." She says to him.

"That's not possible." He answers, and then she looks at him to find him looking at her, flushing, hands fiddling in his lap. All at once she wants to do something terrible, like never go home or wear this ghastly outfit for all time or kiss him.

///

He runs out of camera space, too full of photos of Nancy eating or laughing or looking out the window or writing down notes or standing in the post office line. Neither one of them makes the conscious decision to start driving back, by the time they realise it's happening there is no point in stopping.

He misses his mum, and Will, and his house, and hot food, and his dark room. He misses having a bed and making breakfast with milk and having a building to come home to at night. He has been all over the country now, and its only now he can appreciate how quiet Hawkins truly is. He could walk around the streets for hours and not hear a single thing.

They're out of money anyway, and Hopper is sending them cash with greater spaces of time in between, which probably means he's about to get caught but won't say anything. Anyway, they did their job,

found the people they needed to, know more about what they're doing. They didn't find Eleven but they've found out information that will *lead* them to her if the boys try hard enough, which they will.

"I need to have a three-year long shower" Nancy says as they're driving down the highway, "and play all the records we bought, *and* eat things out of the refrigerator."

Jonathan smiles, her fingers are taping out the tune of the song on the radio against the window, and he has held those hands. Occasionally he will remember, that Nancy Wheeler has held his hand before, hugged him, laughed at his jokes and wrapped his hand after he broke it. It is unbelievable that Nancy Wheeler has touched him before, that he survived being that close to her, being that near a star.

///

They call the others to tell them they're coming home. Joyce cries, Hopper grunts, Karen also cries, Mike tries to sound not bothered about the whole thing and Will tells them to hurry up, he has the new *Smiths* record and is dying to play it for them.

She's sitting in the boot with the back open, legs crossed and reading a book while Jonathan lays out every road map they've ever picked up on the dirt a few feet away from her and tries to figure out where to drive to next. He's weighed down the corners with rocks and is currently trying to find Hawkins on any sort of map, tracing lines though each with a sharpie when she looks up, losing her place in her sentence.

She realises, like a baseball bat to the brain, that it will never be like this again. that by either tomorrow or the day after she will be back home in her own room in her own bed, with him miles away. She won't be sleeping centimetres from him, won't have to force him to swap driving shifts with her, won't be able to look at him and tell him anything she wants because there is no one else around and they've been driving for five straight days. The thought of going back to a place where she will not see him every day, where she spent nearly her entire life not talking to him, is suddenly the worst thing in the world. She's staring at him trying to stop the maps from flying away in the wind and holding a pen cap in his mouth and she wants something she cannot put her finger on. It fills her to the core, a panic, a grimy thing that makes her yell.

“Jonathan!” she shouts, and he looks up immediately, dropping the pen cap. She is still staring, heart pounding in her chest. *Oh god, she thinks, oh god, don't ever let me not know you again. I think it would kill me. I honestly believe that it would.*

**Author's Note:**

have i said yet that i love them? because i love them so much that it is impractical.